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ABSTRACT

Keeping writing center records is perhaps the director's most dreaded chore, and it is often seen as a negative duty detracting from the more important business of helping tutors and student clients. However, research data that computers now make almost instantly available reveals surprisingly positive results and ways of presenting those results to the university at large. Simply put, record keeping allows writing centers to demonstrate their centrality. At the University of Alaska, in addition to the main writing center located within the English department, a satellite center is operated in rural student services, primarily for native students. After researching her computer records, for instance, one director discovered that her supposition that the center had made only slight advances into the Alaskan native student population, a targeted risk group for retention, was completely false. She had interpreted the relatively low numbers of natives visiting the center as bad news, when, in fact, native students were using the writing center at a much higher percentage rate than the student body as a whole. Record keeping on computers also offers other opportunities for research. Cindy Selfe (1994) and Lester Faigley (1992) have shown that the way students perceive a process, such as composing and interacting on computers, significantly affects their output. Also, tutoring conducted over telephone lines offers an opportunity for researchers to study the tutoring process by comparing final drafts with initial drafts, which are faxed to the writing center from various outlying areas. (TB)

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Abstract

"Singing the Song of Ourselves: Projecting the Centrality of Writing Centers through Re-searching our Records" presents unexpected qualitative discoveries made in analyzing empirical data in Writing Center Records. Accurate record keeping showed our contribution to retention of "at risk" groups was far greater than simple observation seemed to indicate. Data from a campus-wide survey revealed that students do not perceive the Center as remedial or marginal. Researching the tutor forms revealed that students "required" by incentives to go to the center often perceive their attendance as "voluntary." Finally, small numbers in some areas may belie the qualitative value of a service. A service may be "central" to focused activity such as distance delivery to non-traditional students.

"Singing the Song of Ourselves: Projecting the Centrality of Writing Centers through Re-searching our Records"

Keeping writing center records are perhaps the director's most dreaded chore, and we often perceive them as a negative duty detracting from the more important business of helping tutors and student clients. Since we have three separate record keeping entities, the task becomes somewhat complicated. In addition to the main Writing Center located in the same building with the English Department, we operate a satellite in Rural Student Services where primarily native students have a lounge, computer lab, and advisors. We

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also operate a Tele-fax service for students taking distance delivery courses at rural sites. As cumbersome as keeping records for each of these services is, researching the data now made almost instantly accessible on computer database reveals surprisingly positive results and ways of projecting those results to the university at large. Researching our records allows us to demonstrate our centrality.

At the UAF Writing Center we keep pay two Student Assistant III's over $7.00 an hour to input data into a standard database, Microsoft Access. We originally used a homemade Basic program that jammed to the point that only the hard copies of those statistics are now usable. We then switched to and IV since our data entry person was familiar with that program. When she graduated and a colleague took over for me for a year, she switched to the present program. Our new data entry students prefer Access, and we have switched yet again. Actually, since the data can be transported freely among all but our original homemade program, the continuity of the data is preserved. The only problem is learning new programs and taking the time to rearrange the information. This expenditure of time, money and effort is considerable--especially if --as most writing centers are--you are short of funds and short of tutor time. We have spent 26 hours on data input and bi-weekly instructor reports in the first 8 weeks of this semester. That figure will more than double by semester's end when we will need time to generate a year-end report. This data should produce more than simple totals to use in justifying our existence.

Learning how to use our data revealed unexpected successes in reaching "at risk groups." In researching our records, I recently discovered my supposition that we had made only slight advances into the Alaska Native student population, a targeted "at risk" group for retention, was completely false. I had misperceived the relatively low numbers as absolute when, in fact, native students were using the writing center at a much higher percentage rate than the student body as a whole. The reason for my mistake resulted from two oversights. I was not aware that student ethnicity, gender and other statistically

useful information was available to us on the university's mainframe. Therefore, I could not contextualize the Writing Center data with the university's centralized data collection results.

We have been collecting ethnicity status on our tutor interview sheets since the day we opened nine years ago, but some tutors felt reticent about asking ethnicity while some tutees switched ethnicity from time to time. By collating social security numbers with the ethnicity the student indicated upon registering for college, we acquired figures consistent within the university. Without that consistency, our data did us little good.

Even with consistent data, I misapprehended its significance because I lacked a meaningful context. However, once I discovered The UAF Fact Book, a publication of the University's Planning, Computing, and Information Systems Department and compared The Writing Center's minority and gender figures with those of the university at large, I discovered Native students were using the center at a greater percentage level than the white population. In addition, native students were passing their composition classes at exactly the same rate as the student body as a whole. This data effectively presented the center's importance to the Chancellor's Enrollment Strategy Board. In addition, I have been able to use this data as the basis for a forthcoming article in Writing in Multicultural Settings.

Consistent data is not the only opportunity for productive research. As Cindy Selfe and Lester Faigley have shown, the way students perceive a process, such as composing and interacting on computers, significantly effects their output. Graduate Students working with the UAF Writing Center data discovered that students they knew were "required" to visit the center were circling "optional" on the interview form. Further research revealed these students were being presented with the writing center as an incentive rather than punishment, and the classroom presentations designed to encourage them emphasized peer successes at the center rather than consequences of failure to go to the center. Methods for creating "Voluntary as a state of mind" will be useful in

tutor/teaching assistantship training and will present even wider research possibilities. If we could discover ways to make the decision of which required courses in the core curriculum to take seem to be a real choice, perhaps students would feel a real responsibility for the course they chose. This sense of responsibility for the material could change the whole tenor of these classes. We could also research possibilities for students perceiving some of the assignments in required courses to be voluntary if not the course itself. If we or our graduate students initiate this type of research and publicize the results within our own schools as well as publish them abroad, the Writing Center's centrality to whole university will become evident to those who sit on curriculum committees and university councils.

Data reflects what we do, and sometimes data that appears inconsequential actually points to great centrality and significance to the system as a whole. Perhaps the service that has made our Writing center most "central" to the university has been the Tele-Fax tutoring to students taking distance delivery courses. Students fax in their papers to an 800-number anytime day or night with a request for session during our operating hours. The tutor calls the student to confirm the appointment, then student and tutor confer at the specified time. This service meets the university's mission to reach our half-million citizens who are spread over a land mass one-fifth the size of the all the "lower 48 states." That means, when we tutor a student in Shismaref or Savoonga, we could be located in D.C. tutoring a student in Albuquerque. We have increased from 29 sessions in Fall 1992 when I started the program to 140 sessions for 1994-1995. The numbers may seem small to universities in densely populated areas, but this program is as expandable as budgets and tutoring hours allow. Despite its size, the program has had a great impact on the quality of papers received by history and education teachers in Nome and English instructors in Unalaska.

The support for tele-fax among the faculty surprised me recently. When my grant ran out, the distance delivery teachers raised such a ruckus at the prospect of losing the

service that the School of Education first offered to pick up the bill, but they were outbid by the College of Rural Alaska. The increase in money has allowed us to add 3 hours of tutoring on Saturday and 5 additional hours on Sunday to our original 3 hours four nights a week previously offered. The Rural College pays the phone and fax bills. In addition, Upward Bound, which employs our tutors in the summer, was so impressed with the caliber of tutoring and our other connections with distance delivery, that they invited us to participate in their federal grant. Their rural high school students may now keep in touch with their tutors during the regular school year. The Writing Center is becoming essential to the university's outreach mission and gives students a connection with the main campus that we hope will draw them in for their upper division work.

The research possibilities inherent in this multicultural extended classroom are infinite. In addition, the techniques used in distance delivery can work as well and work cheaper in urban areas serving non-traditional students who have trouble getting to a central location away from home and work. Not only do we overcome distance, but the duplication process offered by faxing creates other research possibilities. For example, a colleague in Nome and I plan to compare tutorial drafts worked in by telephone with the final paper turned in. Because papers are Faxed in to us, we retain a copy of the draft as well as the tutors' comments both on the paper and on the interview sheet. The instructor, of course, gets the final paper. We can construct a record of what kinds of advice the student chose to incorporate or reject in the final product. This research can be an invaluable in determining what kind of advice works to greatest effect.

Finally, if student perceptions affect their attitudes toward the writing center and their classes, our perceptions of our centrality or marginality affect our attitude toward ourselves and others. In tutor training I consciously avoid any reference to the perception of writing centers as marginal. My tutors have returned from conferences amazed that other centers didn't perceive themselves as at least as important as classroom teaching. Our data shows our centrality and the data improves every semester. I make sure

everybody I can think of gets copies of these reports. However, there is nothing like outside corroboration to increase awareness. In Spring 1993 the university commissioned a national survey to assess student satisfaction with services. Since I served on the Enrollment Strategy Board, which added areas to those already preset, we included a rating for the Writing Center. The survey revealed what our own data is showing. The students rated the writing center as the most used service on campus and gave it their highest satisfaction rating. The center is truly "central" in their minds, and we now we hope it is central in the hearts of our administration.

I know other writing centers are working just as hard as we are and getting similar results. We need to join a chorus of Singing ourselves by using our hard-earned data not only to tell them that marginality is a misperception but to show them our true centrality.

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